

How to Criticize Other Christians without Being Mean

Matt Smethurst



Every now and again it's good to be reminded of the obvious. We need such reminders more often than we'd like to admit.

I know I do.

At various times in my Christian life I've been startled by the ease with which I can jump to conclusions, assume the worst, and demonize those with whom I disagree. In these moments the Lord has often reminded me, sometimes painfully, of a simple truth: don't let your zeal for principle eclipse your love for people.

Principles matter greatly, to be sure. I have zero interest in waving a flag that minimizes the importance of holding tightly to biblical principles. But I do wish to wave one that says, "Whatever our disagreements on secondary matters,[1] let's make sure we're viewing and treating our fellow Christians (<http://www.christianity.com/>) as what they are—family."

Hearts Exposed

My job as an editor entails interacting with a lot of Christian books. If you've spent much time browsing Christian bookstores, you may have noticed the selection can be a bit of a mixed bag. We in the West have more resources than ever at our disposal—which is both a blessing and a curse. A friend who works in Christian publishing recently borrowed the words of Charles Dickens to describe the state of the industry today: "It is the best of times and it is the worst of times."

You see, I'm prone to rolling my eyes at—if not outright disdaining—Christian authors who produce unhelpful material. Now, maybe bookstores or bestseller lists aren't your struggle. But just because the occasion is different doesn't mean underlying issues—pride, judgmentalism, malice—are not there in your heart, simmering, finding expression *somewhere*.

Criticism is sometimes appropriate, of course. So is straight-up confrontation. But slander never is. And it isn't as if slander only becomes wrong the moment it's verbalized. Unspewed venom isn't morally neutral and it isn't innocuous—it's lethal to the soul. Ungodly venom can easily, subtly fester in our hearts, leading us to silently slander those for whom our great King died.

Let's take care, then, not to let our hearts engage in silent slander. Genuine questioning? Sure. Trenchant criticism? Certainly. But heart-level defamation? May it never be.

Power-Fueled Love

Thirty-eight years ago John Stott wrote a brief article for the theological journal *Themelios*[2] titled "Paul Prays For the Church." In it, Stott steps through Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14–21, considering the substance of the apostle's petitions along the way. At one point Stott writes:

If we were to ask Paul what he wanted his readers to be strengthened for, I think he would reply that they needed strength to love. . . . For in the new and reconciled humanity which God has created, love is the preeminent virtue.

Where, though, can we find resources for such counterintuitive, impossible-to-muster love? Stott writes:

Paul's prayer concerns the fulfillment of his vision of the new society which God has created in and through Christ. He prays that we may be rooted and grounded in love, and may know Christ's love although it passes knowledge. Then he turns from the love of God past knowing to the power of God past imagining, from limitless love to limitless power. He is convinced, as we must be, that only divine power can generate divine love in the divine society.

Such power to love, then, comes only from him who bled for our sad ability to revile virtually anyone except ourselves. It comes only from him who rose in the very resurrection power that's still at work today in everyone who is connected to Jesus by faith. To the degree that the Spirit empowers us to see the horror of our sin and the beauty of our Savior, we'll find ourselves freed from the twin threats of "loveless truth" and "truthless love"—liberated instead to speak the "truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15 (<http://www.biblestudytools.com/esv/ephesians/4-15.html>)). We'll be enabled to critique, correct, and confront without succumbing to slander, even in the silent confines of our own hearts.

Unity without Uniformity

Again, this isn't to imply truth is unimportant. It is. Sacrificing truth on the altar of unity is just as bad—worse, even—than sacrificing unity on the altar of truth. Nevertheless, prizing truth is not incompatible with pursuing peace (Matthew 5:8 (<http://www.biblestudytools.com/esv/matthew/5-8.html>); Romans 12:18 (<http://www.biblestudytools.com/esv/romans/12-18.html>)). As the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs (1600–1646) put it, “Difference of belief and unity of believers is not inconsistent.”

May the Lord grant us the wisdom and grace to mingle clarity of conviction with untiring affection for sinning saints. Despite our differences, all Christians are fellow travelers, siblings, soldiers, sufferers, and heirs. May our witness reflect the deep unity we share.

As we strive to be marked by gospel truth, let's labor just as untiringly to be marked by gospel love.

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[1] By “secondary matters” I mean issues that are important but not essential for salvation. Examples include views on baptism (<https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/baptism-what-is-it-meaning-and-definition.html>) (whether to baptize babies or believers), charismatic gifts (e.g., speaking in tongues), church government, and, of course, the end-times.

[2] The entire archives of *Themelios* can be accessed for free at The Gospel Coalition (<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>).

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-  When a Harsh Pastor Is Really a False Teacher
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